

LA COMMONS

Creating Cultural Connections

Travel eight miles southwest of downtown Los Angeles and you will find what is considered the heart of African American culture in the city, Leimert Park. Within a tree-lined, two-block area are jazz and blues clubs, more than a dozen art galleries, soul food eateries, the KAOS Network Community Art Center, and Eso-Won Books, the largest African American bookstore, west of the Mississippi. Developed in the late 1920s as a planned community for white middle class families, Leimert Park witnessed a White flight in the 1950s, which accelerated after the Watts riots of 1965. While the White population fled, a new African American population started moving in, with many visual and performing artists and musicians among the new residents.



Despite its many cultural establishments, Leimert Park has not been able to completely recover from the disinvestment that followed the civil unrest of 1992. Many businesses are struggling, and some have permanently closed their doors. The threats of redevelopment, gentrification and displacement in particular, have been the impetus for the establishment of the Save Leimert Neighborhood Coalition. Despite its mythic status as a mecca for African American culture, the neighborhood remains rather invisible to the wider public.

This contrast between the community's cultural assets and its economic struggles has drawn [LA Commons](#) to Leimert Park as a long-term partner in its community-based arts programs. Since 2004, LA Commons has developed public art projects with local artists and youth and produced workshops and events to bring visitors to the area. Several years ago, the organization decided to locate its office in Leimert Park.

[Leimert Park](#) is one of eight neighborhoods LA Commons has worked with to give voice to the area's unique stories through community-based arts programs. Developed by artists in collaboration with local youth, these projects create a genuine artistic expression that illuminates an important aspect of the community's culture or history. Since programming activities began in 2003, LA Commons has developed grass-roots projects and initiatives in eight neighborhoods: MacArthur Park, Koreatown, Chinatown, Mid-City, Sylmar, East Hollywood (Little Armenia and Thai Town), Leimert Park and Highland Park. These programs have brought together 50 artists and 280 youth, along with over 1,500 members of the communities in an innovative process of grass roots artistic and cultural discovery.



Taking Flight: Migration Dreams involved displays of kites at the Koreatown Galleria and paper-mache puppets in MacArthur Park that shared stories of Korean and Central America immigrants in Los Angeles. Bangladeshi Dreams was a series of light pole banners reflecting the experiences of the

Bangladeshi community living and working in Koreatown. Utility boxes have been painted with themes representing the Armenian and Thai cultures of East Hollywood and woodblock prints sharing neighborhood stories were installed in Highland Park.

In the Leimert Park banner project, youth artists worked with filmmaker and animator Jabari Hall-Smith to create a series of light pole banners highlighting the area's African American cultural treasures. In preparation for the project, the youth met with renowned artist John Outerbridge, toured the public art in Leimert Park, and discussed how art can enhance meaning and value in a place. Hall-Smith shared examples of art in periodicals, graphic novels, and the internet to provide a context and inspiration for the youth's artwork. To create the banners, Hall-Smith and the youth scanned their original drawings, paintings, and photographs of



cultural landmarks and created digital images, which were printed on vinyl. Well-received by the community, the banners were installed along the area's main thoroughfare, Crenshaw Boulevard. LA Commons introduced "[Trekking LA](#)" in 2006, providing an opportunity for visitors from other parts of Los Angeles, and tourists from outside the region, to discover and experience these arts and cultural projects, as well as the authentic food, music, festivals and rich cultural history of the communities. From sampling barbecue in neighborhoods across Los Angeles, to listening to jazz music and watching dancing from around the

world, these tours spur both increased cultural interaction and economic activity.

Leimert Park has hosted a number of Trekking LA tours. One itinerary included a grill-side presentation and meat tasting by Louisiana native, Andre Weathersby while listening to the sounds at the World Stage Jazz Festival. The day started out in the park where tour-goers were serenaded by local A capella group, Renaissance.



This June, LA Commons will produce the Festival of Masks, a half-day event featuring Nigerian master performer Najite Agindotan, African mask making workshops, and a celebratory procession with giant puppets culminating in a rousing spoken word performance. The event will coincide with Leimert Park Art Walk, a free self-guided art and community experience bringing visual and performance art to currently unoccupied space in Leimert Park Village.

Building upon the successful Trekking LA series, this fall LA Commons is launching a Neighborhood Docent program that will recruit, train, and connect a team of local guides to their neighbors, fellow Angelenos and curious visitors all in search of discovering a more authentic, homegrown L.A. Unlike other tours these will not be produced events and are not run by professionals. Instead, the Neighborhood Docents will act as friendly guides and fellow travelers through the vast sea of Los Angeles enclaves. Neighborhood Docent tours are truly by the city and for the city.



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Also coming this fall are a festival of neighborhoods and a dynamic new website. During the festival of neighborhoods hundreds of participants will join us on a trek through neighborhoods across Los Angeles all in a single day. They will peak inside garage studios, taste freshly made baklava, and the hear stories of Los Angeles from the artists, bakers and makers themselves.

As the vibrant, multicultural city of Los Angeles grows and evolves, LA Commons reflects and documents these changes through visual and performing arts, food, rituals, and festivals. Bringing people from throughout the city together to share and celebrate the arts and culture of distinct ethnic neighborhoods is LA Commons' contribution to an inclusive city, one that allows for the stories of all of its residents to be heard.

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Photo subjects (in order presented): *Leimert Park Mural*- Youth put the finishing touches on a mural depicting historic and cultural symbols and stories of Leimert Park. Lead artist: Roberto Del Hoyo; *Korean Dancers* - Korean dancers perform a traditional dance during a Trekking LA tour of Koreatown; *Leimert Park Banners* - Light pole banners created by youth and artists installed along Crenshaw Blvd. Lead artist: Jabari Hall-Smith; *LP_Carlos Spivey* - Artist Carlos Spivey gives a demonstration of his work during a Trekking LA tour of Leimert Park; *Welcome to East Hollywood* - A utility box mural painted by East Hollywood youth challenges negative perceptions of the community. Lead artists: José Lozano and Gloria Álvarez.



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